

Client: Utah
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UTAH
LIFE ELEVATED

Grand designs

There's grand adventure to be had in Grand Junction, Colorado, as **Tim Anderson** discovers during his action-packed week in the Rockies...

Like generations of previous travellers crossing the treacherous Rocky Mountains, I am given a bear hug on arrival. For travellers in generations past, it was a gesture of congratulations at arriving in Grand Junction, Colorado – the gateway to the fertile plains of the western United States.

For me, the flight is significantly easier and signals arrival in the adventure playground that is now Grand Junction's feature. Today, this town is a gateway for outdoor living, where sports and games meet the matching natural environment to form an activity haven. At different times over two weeks, I went hiking, mountain biking before breakfast and cross-country skiing through snowy forests. We also arranged a climbing expedition up the National Monument, walked across a desert and spent an evening under the full moon in natural hot springs at the base of the Rockies. All

within two hours' drive of town. A visit to Grand Junction is tiring and uplifting at the same time.

The junction of the name is the meeting of two huge rivers – the Gunnerson and the Colorado – that run through the Grand Valley. This 'grand junction' provided fertile pastoral lands for establishing the town. Over a millennium, these rivers and their tributaries carved their way through the sandstone and clay soil that make up much of the terrain, leaving natural wonders everywhere. The Grand Valley

is caught on three sides by mountains and on one by the Utah desert, some 20km across the border to the west of town. While the weather can be unbearably still and hot in summer, in winter weather systems can sit and drench the town in darkness and rain for weeks at a time. It's a fair bet to say that the best times of year are to go either in

autumn or spring, during the peach harvest and when there is some snow around to play with.

GRAND GARFIELD

Two days after my arrival to visit a friend living there, he apologises for having to go to the office and drops me at the base of Mt Garfield on the north-eastern edge of the Valley. "I'll be back in 90 minutes. That should be enough time to get to the top and back. Take some photos."

I am left by the side of the road looking up at Mt Garfield (named after the 20th president), part of a range called the Book Cliffs. At the top of the Cliffs is a huge plateau stretching all the way through Vail towards Denver, and over time the subsoil of adobe clay has poured out of the cliff face into the valley, leaving a two-toned mountain range of sandstone at the very top and soft muddy clay at the opposite end.



WRITER PROFILE

Tim Anderson, 37, was born in Australia and is currently living near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He spent ten years living in Europe and has been around North and South America for several years travel writing.

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As I head up the steep incline, I wonder just how I am going to make it to the top and back in time, my heart thumping through my rib cage in the thinner altitude air. Runners pass me in Mesa State College tops sprinting up and down the narrow yet well-worn path. But fortunately as I climb it becomes flatter and easier going, the view of the valley behind dropping away dramatically.

Peach farms and scattered communities dot the gentle undulation of the flats of the valley, with mountains of different gradients and colours rising at the valley extremes. The clay turns into harder sandstone for the last part of the climb, where the view is steep and impressive as the sun sets slowly behind me away over the plateau.

While perhaps not the easiest climb considering the terrain, the view is sweeping and dramatic and certainly justifies the effort to reach it. The climb down is somewhat precarious due to the shifting nature of the stones in the soft clay soil. In total it takes about the hour and a half my friend suggested, with ample photo time to relax at the top.

What makes Grand Junction such a great place to experience the outdoors, aside from the variety of terrain, is the dry, crisp air that surrounds it. It's an oasis for asthma sufferers and those who don't like to be sweltering while hiking or moving about. At an altitude of 4,500 feet, it's high without causing sickness, headaches or bleeding noses, although everything feels a little bit harder to do

while you're still acclimatising. It's a combination that brings out the sportsperson in both residents and visitors, with local races and competitions held regularly throughout the year for various sports, including skiing, mountain biking, rafting, climbing, canyoning and (not surprisingly) running.

The following day we head off to an early dinner at the local Nepalese/Indian restaurant appropriately named Nepal, where American-sized quantities of *laksa*

and creamy chicken korma feed the local clientele. It should be said, though, that dining out in Grand Junction is not really the highlight, nor the point, of being here; the gourmet pizza store, Pablo's, providing New York-style gluttony with Mid-West-sounding dishes on the menu, such as 'The Cowboy'.

The main street is generally an odd collection of second-hand record stores, embroidery and souvenir shops, tied in with cafés and the odd bar. There are malls and speciality shops around the fringes of town and some of the bigger chains like Walmart.

Our early dinner is a preparation for the evening activity, a moonlight trip to the natural hot springs at nearby Orvis. The road south is as straight as an arrow and is frequently visited by the natural wildlife, with many warning signs for deer and foxes lining the highway.

The hot springs themselves are a natural wonder, providing the locals with a swimming escape from the winter air in the Rocky Mountains. Well catered for with camping grounds, the springs can be open all night long for camping guests. Three pools exist, the Lobster Pot being the hottest – an unfiltered melting pot of natural volcanic waters. Despite the sub-zero air temperature, it took me three attempts to get in without raising my voice like a suffering crustacean!

We sat in the darkness and watched the full moon rise over the mountains

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towering above us. The early winter wind blew steadily against us, but sitting in the pool I was perfectly comfortable. By the time we left it was nearly 11pm, and I was so hot from the pools that the cold was barely noticed. We stayed a while after and cooked a meal in the provided kitchen, where the free coffee and chocolate drinks were much appreciated.

The drive home completed a relaxing evening – too relaxed, perhaps, as we cruised through the small communities along the way, casually failing to notice the drop in speed signs and earning a \$200 fine from the local police, who, I must admit, were nonetheless very friendly. But we'd been too relaxed after our experience at Orvis to be concerned about 55 miles an hour on an empty road at nearly midnight on a Tuesday.

GRAND MESA PLATEAU

I slept like a log when I got back, the snow starting to fall heavily across the



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white picket-fenced lawns and aspen trees of suburban Grand Junction. By the following morning, there was enough snow to consider a day trip for some cross-country skiing, and a quick match-up of equipment and interested parties found us prepared for a trip up the Grand Mesa, a second plateau rising to 10,500 feet above the Grand Valley, behind the first Book Cliffs plateau.

The climb is a short one hour-drive, the breathtaking views of over 180 degrees overlooking the Valley, the Book Cliffs from behind and the Rocky Mountains climbing higher again from the Book Cliff plateau – a viewing distance of probably 70 miles, which was awe-inspiring to behold.

The snowfalls were significantly higher at this altitude, and the base for cross-country trails that run all across the huge Mesa plateau was solid, with light, fresh snow for easy skiing. Cross-country skiing is a fitness junkie's passion. The tempo changes all the time depending on whether you're going up or down on the trail and, added to the variable of wind or snow, it becomes a very demanding activity.

But it's also very calm and beautiful. The forest surrounding the trail provides untouched picture-postcard fresh snow scenes as we pass. There are over 50 miles of groomed trails for cross-country skiing on the Grand Mesa – a break from the multitude of more famous downhill Colorado ski resorts nearby, such as Vail, Steamboat and Breckenridge.

The short drive home made me suddenly aware of why Grand Junction is

National Park, home to some of the most remarkable sandstone formations seen in the world. Ages past have created valleys and monoliths of unique shape and character, the weather literally cutting giant holes in the rock, forming huge bridges of stone over the desert floor.

We visited the red ochre-stained so-called 'Windows' (although they really look like a pair of oval eyes) – 25 metres high and 100 metres along both of them – through which the desert floor sweeps behind. The snow-capped mountains of Colorado way off in the distance completed a majestic picture in the setting sun, the desert sacrificing its blood orange colours to the last of the dying light.

With it being too late to get to see the most famous arch, the so-called Delicate Arch, way out on the other side of the park, we headed home via a road that follows the Colorado River cutting its way across the countryside back to its home.

Thanksgiving is the feast of America, where pilgrims from times past gave thanks for the harvest with a plentiful stuffing of food and drink. A gathering is planned for an 'Orphan's meal' – a reference to the Grand Junction locals

“Grand Junction is an outdoor paradise. These guys literally have it all on their doorstep”

considered such an outdoor paradise. These guys literally have it all on their doorstep; there are sufficient shops and ski hire places to be found in town and the climate and elevations are varied enough to provide a palette of things to do and see. And it's not all Colorado either. Just across the western border with Utah, some 20 miles away, is the Utah desert and that includes Arches



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that cannot return to their families and hometowns to share the holidays with and therefore celebrate together. While this scene is not uncommon in numerous states across America, there is a pre-activity ritual among many from 'The Junc' (as the locals sometimes call it): cross-country mountain biking.

Probably the most popular daily activity along with hiking for most locals and visitors here, the nearest MTB (mountain biking) trails are literally a five-minute drive from the centre of town – a series of trails called the Lunch Loops. They are called so because people in Grand Junction have taken to cross-country riding on their lunch breaks, the proximity of trails being so convenient.

Our Thanksgiving group decided on a pre-lunch ride (although I had prepared for the feast by missing breakfast!) up a nearby mountain, the terrain a challenging mixture of the same weathered sandstone. On the way down it feels as if the trails could realistically finish up in the town somewhere spread out in the immediate foreground of the mountain, once again sweeping views of the majestic Grand Valley impressing.

With the feast now justified, we headed off to Thanksgiving ready for a meal made up of some prehistorically-sized turkey cooked in a barrel of oil – all in Deep Southern-style, even though we are really still only Mid-West. More delicious was the buffalo, which, while by no means cheap, is a rich, sweet meat and a local speciality that every carnivore should experience.

THE GRAND NATIONAL

With so much nature around, the locals seem to embrace the outdoor lifestyle and all its offerings. As a junction for using every sporting good you ever bought or thought of buying, Grand Junction is Mecca. And with time running out for my stay here, there were still plenty of activities I had yet to try. I was offered the chance to go climbing on the

National Monument – camping, fishing and rafting was ruled out because of the coming winter temperatures, and a visit to the epic Black Canyon was sidelined. Of course, the downhill skiing wasn't quite ready yet, so after some deliberation it was down to climbing to save the day.

The National Monument is a reserve and activity park for hikers and climbers about 20 minutes behind the Lunch Loops. The 'Coke Ovens', a series of fat monoliths carved out of the sandstone, are the site of the climb, the deep rivulets in the 'ovens' making it an easy climb for beginners despite the seemingly steep sides. Unfortunately the weather closed in before we could start, the zero-degree temperatures not ideal for finger gripping on the jagged edges of the sandstone.

It seems there is much climbing in the area that attracts people to this part of the state. This is one of the best places for people to base themselves when attempting to climb a 14-er – a series of Rocky Mountain peaks that rise over 14,000 feet. Conquering all of the more than 50 peaks has become a bit of a local challenge, with the added incentive of sweeping views of the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

All too soon my week drew to a close and, although I felt physically drawn out and quartered, each activity I'd attempted brought its own challenges and excitement. While the relative bustle of Denver is only five hours away, Grand Junction remains an outpost in Colorado for the adventurous, the sporting and those with the energy for activity and the need for constant variety.

A good suggestion, to make the most of a stay here, is to get fitter before going. Not having any fitness or plans to be fitter when going to Grand Junction is like going to Disneyland and forgetting to take the children. You sort of miss the point and half the fun. But Colorado also provides plenty of exercise for those wanting to work only the bicep and elbow while seated watching sports on TV. After all, Colorado is known to have

probably the best microbreweries in the country. If tasting the local brew is your idea of a good night out then you'll be busy following up your day's adventure with a sample of 'Fat Tire' and 'Broken Oar' on sale in the college bars in the heart of town.

For me, Grand Junction is the place you need to go if you've already covered enough of America's cities and airports and need some other reason to love visiting the US. It's the place to discover your adventurous self – your outdoor sports-loving, competitive, active self. If you're not interested in galleries, tired of city traffic and feel like some fresh air, then Colorado can provide. A playground for the great outdoors, it's a starting place for many a grand adventure. ◀



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INFORMATION

GETTING THERE



British Airways (www.ba.com), Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) and United Airlines (www.united.com) all fly direct to Denver, Colorado, from London Heathrow, while indirect flights are available from various other airlines.

Grand Junction Regional Airport (www.gjairport.com) is the gateway to the area and is well connected to cities such as Phoenix, Salt Lake City and Denver, but you can, of course, also drive from Denver in around five hours.

GETTING AROUND



Public transport is virtually non-existent around Grand Junction and certainly doesn't run to the areas where visitors can discover the great outdoors, so a car is a must to get around.

ACCOMMODATION



There are various options in Grand Junction, including a Best Western hotel and a Holiday Inn, but Tim recommends the clean, centrally located and relatively inexpensive Hampton Inn (<http://hamptoninn.hilton.com>), where rooms start at US\$79.

There is also camping in the parks – visit www.visitgrandjunction.com/camping

ACTIVITIES



For cycling, Ruby Canyon Cycles in downtown Grand Junction is a reliable place to rent bikes for mountain biking, while Back Country Biker (www.backcountrybiker.com) arranges tours. The Mesa Lakes Resort also provides equipment hire for the seasons as well as remote old fashioned-style mountain accommodation for the adventurous.

VISAS



British passport holders can enter the USA on the Visa Waiver Scheme (as long as the stay is for 90 days or less). However, you will still need to complete an online ESTA at least 72 hours before travel to gain entry, costing US\$14. Visit <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov>

HEALTH



Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, rabies and tetanus should be considered depending on the length and nature of your trip.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

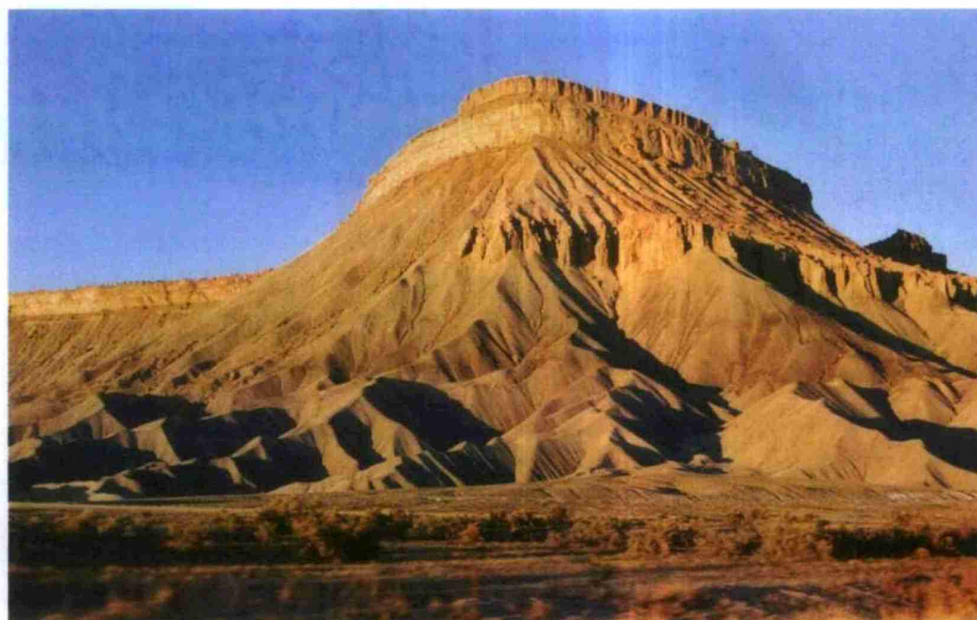
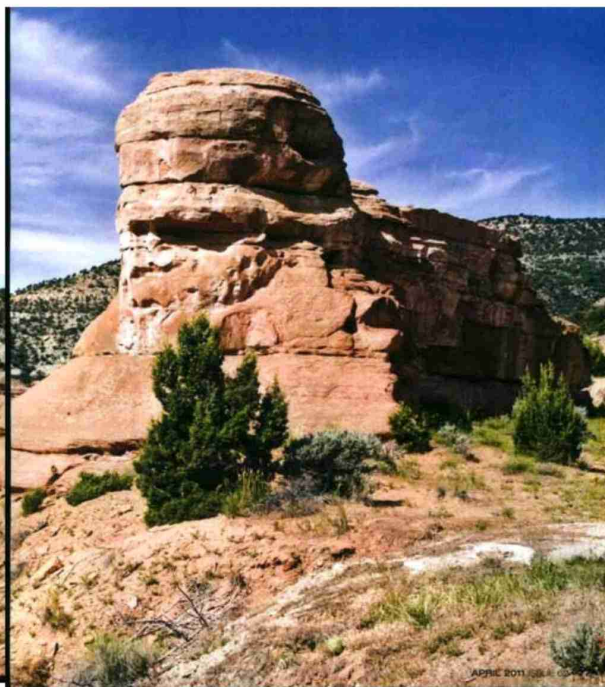


When you head to Grand Junction will largely depend on what you plan to do. If skiing or cross-country skiing is your thing, you'll obviously need snow, which means late autumn, winter and early spring are your months. The rest of the year will then let you do pretty much anything you like (save for the skiing, of course).



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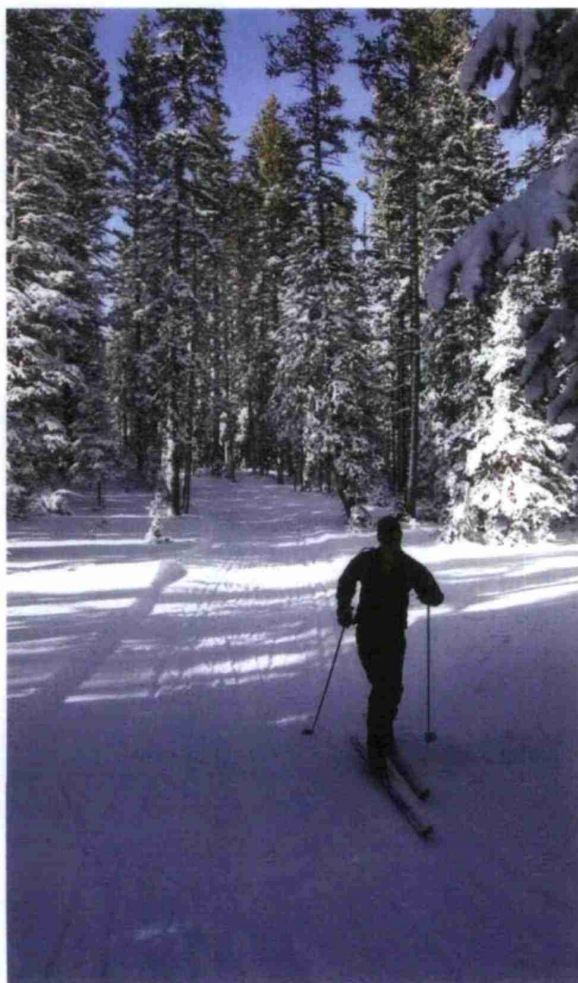


Previous spread:
Natural rock formations
in Colorado's National
Monument
Above: The view up to
Mt Garfield



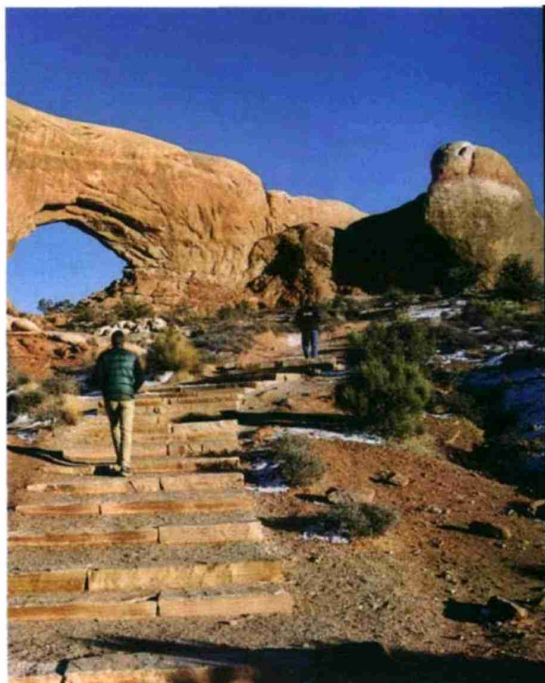
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Above opposite: Tim enjoying the views over the Grand Valley

Below opposite:

Cross-country skiing

Above left: Mountain biking on the so-called 'Lunch Loops'

Above: Some of the region's sandstone rock formations